

# Analysis of the self-presentation of marathon 'show-offs'

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**Abstract:** In recent years, marathon events in China have experienced explosive growth, but numerous issues have also arisen during the organization of these events. The term "marathon show-offs," borrowed from internet slang, is used by the author to describe participants who, driven by a mentality of blind conformity and self-aggrandizement, engage in marathon races to showcase themselves in a "unique" manner ("appearance" and "behavior") on the marathon course. Employing documentary research and logical analysis methods from the perspective of Goffman's "Dramaturgy Theory," the author attempts to interpret the problems emerging in the nationwide "marathon craze" from the viewpoint of participants who are "showing off" their marathon participation. The conclusion reached is that many characteristics of the marathon course align with the display platform of "show-offs"; during the competition, the excessive flaunting and self-presentation by "show-offs" neglect the essence of marathon racing. It is worth reflecting that a significant number of marathon participants with a "show-off" mentality have, to a certain extent, contributed to many of the problems encountered in the process of marathon competitions.

**Keywords:** Marathon, Show-offs, Self-presentation, Goffman's Dramaturgy Theory

## 1. Introduction

On December 20, 2015, the last marathon of the year in China, the inaugural Fuzhou International Marathon, came to a successful end. This marked the conclusion of a year of "explosive" growth in marathon events in China for 2015. Early in 2015, the China Athletics Association simplified administration and delegated power, canceling the approval process for marathon events. Coupled with the gradual promotion of the internet plus fitness (sports apps) model and the widespread publicity of sports brands (running), these factors accelerated the "enthusiasm to host" marathons in cities and the "enthusiasm to participate" among the public. In 2010, there were only about 10 marathon events in China, but in the just-passed 2015, this number reached 134, nearly an 11-fold increase in just five years. Following this growth momentum, some estimate that the number of marathon events in China in 2016 will reach 200. At the same time, the number of participants has also been increasing year by year with the increase in the number of events. In the past 2015, more than 1.5 million people participated in marathon events, nearly four times that of 2011[1]. However, with the surge in enthusiasm for hosting marathon events in various cities, a series of problems have also emerged on the course, such as sudden death of participants, disorderly organization and management, insufficient emergency public facilities, environmental pollution, and traffic paralysis... In response, experts from all sides have called for a cooling down of the nationwide "marathon fever."

"Show-offs" refer to people who display their lives, experiences, and emotions online and share them with others. In terms of pronunciation, "show-offs" are similar to the English word "sharer," which means "to share or share alike"[2]. Looking at various online forums and personal social platforms today, "show-offs" not only come from a wide range of sources but also display an increasing variety of items. Based on the purposes of online "show-offs" in displaying items, we can generally categorize "show-offs" into mood display type, information sharing type, showing off and competing type, overnight fame type,

and exposure type [3]. From the perspective of psychological analysis of "show-offs," Xu Xiaobo [4] summarizes the special psychology of "show-offs" as four mechanisms: conformity, seeking emotional release, obtaining a sense of self-identity, and compensating for the loss of goals; Han Xiaodan and others believe that among "show-offs," there are also those who "seek self-improvement and develop unique personality traits; show off wealth and compete, satisfying narcissism and vanity"[5].

Marathon events, as large-scale competitions where professionals, amateurs, and ordinary running enthusiasts can all participate on the same stage, are naturally a background that many "show-offs" will not miss. Based on the above analysis, this study temporarily defines marathon "show-offs" as people who, with a mentality of blind conformity and self-showing off, participate in marathon events and use their "unique" performance methods ("appearance" and "behavior") on the course to achieve self-display. In the face of many problems appearing in the nationwide "marathon fever," the author attempts to interpret from the perspective of participants "showing off marathon fever."

## 2. "Dramaturgical theory" overview

American sociologist Goffman, in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," elaborated on the "Dramaturgical Theory" of interpersonal interaction in social communication. He believed that if we consider the role interactions of each person in society as performances, then the stage of performance can be divided into the "front stage" (the real self) and the "back stage" (the false self). Only by appropriately switching "roles" between the two can our life be considered a successful performance.

Firstly, Goffman used "performance" to explain the total behavior of an individual in the continuous presence of a specific group of observers, which has certain impacts on the observers [6]. Borrowing the concept of the "stage" from theatrical performance, Goffman defined the part of the appropriate situation that is deliberately presented in front of observers in a general, fixed, and regularly defined manner as the "front stage" of the performance. As opposed to the "front stage," which is what the audience sees and conforms to the social norms and expectations for roles, the "back stage" refers to the part that is not shown to the audience, restricting the entry of the audience and outsiders to the stage [7]. Or, the "back stage" is associated with the given performance, where the impressions fostered by the performances are deliberately created to have the opposite effect of the front-stage performance [8]. For example, the performances on the "front stage" are all carefully designed in the "back stage." Here, performers can create various illusions and impressions they need without any disguise or concealment. The "front stage" and "back stage" are the two most important areas of performance, and how to freely switch "roles" between the two determines whether the performer's performance can be successful.

In order to achieve their goals, performers will design scripts in the "back stage" based on their idealized performances, and then on the "front stage" use external "props," "special settings," "stage backgrounds," and interactions and communications among "crew" and "cast" members to achieve the expected defined situation, thereby presenting a predetermined impression to observers, which is the idealized performance. As a social role, the reason why people need to perform is that there is a certain difference between the socialized self on the "front stage" and the humanized self on the "back stage" [9]. By using the stage background to separate the two different areas and complete the role switch of the performance, socialized impression management can be formed.

In the process of performance, in addition to the "performer role" that accepts the performance, there are two other roles. They may be insignificant to the entire performance process, but they are of great significance to the performer's performance process. If their performance is interrupted, the whole performance cannot go on, and the author calls them "disruptive roles" [10]. "Disruptive roles" are divided into two types: one is the outsider role that neither participates in nor accepts the performance, such as informers, accomplices, supervisors, spies, intermediaries; the other is a person who is not present throughout the entire performance process but accidentally obtains information about the performance, such as service experts, training experts, close friends, peers, etc. Not all performances go smoothly according to the script. There are many uncertain factors in the performance process, such as the "back stage" area, which does not allow observers to enter. Once an observer enters the back stage and discovers the truth, the performance cannot continue. Obviously, this is a situation we are not happy to see.

### 3. Analysis of self-presentation of marathon 'show-offs'

#### 3.1. Marathon races provide "show-offs" with the possibility to perform on stage.

Marathon races, as an ancient sport, have been a competition event in both the ancient and modern Olympic Games. The marathon requires participants to complete 42.195 kilometers in the shortest time possible. Long duration, large exercise volume, periodicity, and repetitiveness in performing the same action (running) are its most prominent features. Therefore, the process of a marathon race is not only an extreme challenge to physical endurance but also a tempering of psychological qualities.

##### 3.1.1. *Marathon races have simple and easy-to-perform technical movements.*

Competitive sports have gradually shown a highly specialized trend, especially for athletes who achieve excellent results in world-class events. Not only do they need innate athletic talent, but they also require long-term, systematic, and persistent training with planning and organization. With the progress of society and the shift towards a simpler, faster, and smarter lifestyle, people's pursuit of life quality and fitness methods has been continuously improving. For most of the general public with fitness needs, most competitive sports are obviously not suitable, so choosing a reasonable form of exercise as a fitness program is very necessary. Marathon races are favored because their technical movements are relatively simple; participants only need to complete the specified competition distance by running or walking in the shortest time under this background. Running or walking is the most basic form of human movement, so for the general public, participating in marathon events greatly lowers the barrier to participating in high-level competitions.

##### 3.1.2. *The special nature of marathon race venues*

Traditional sports events are held in relatively enclosed venues (such as various stadiums and training grounds, and even outdoor competition venues are surrounded by stands), which are either familiar pieces of land or common circles. The greatest charm of marathon races lies in the openness of the competition venues. The selection of marathon venues often combines the unique geographical environment of the city and is integrated with city tourism. For participants, not only can they enjoy the beautiful scenery along the race track during the run, but they can also distract themselves by appreciating the environment, eliminating the tedium of long-distance running.

##### 3.1.3. *The inclusivity of marathon competitions for participants*

The charm of any sport lies in its competitive and confrontational nature, and in high-level sports competitions, the athletes are professionals who have undergone long-term training and possess superb technical skills. For such events and sports, it is almost impossible for amateur enthusiasts and the general public to compete on the same stage as professional athletes.

Marathon races, however, are different. They can include both high-level world-class professional athletes and amateur running enthusiasts, as well as the general public. Although the competitive levels are not comparable, the rules allow everyone to compete together. The greatest charm of sports is competition, and defeating opponents to win the championship is almost the dream of all sports participants. Marathon races are different in this regard; as ordinary people and amateur marathon runners sign up for the race, they are well aware from the start that the outcome is predetermined, and they have no chance of winning the championship, yet they still participate wholeheartedly. This reflects the Olympic spirit endowed by Mr. Coubertin, "participation is the most important" and "participation is the greatest victory."

#### 3.2. Marathon 'show-offs' backstage and script design

##### 3.2.1. *Backstage roles*

When Goffman elaborated on "Dramaturgical Theory," he used the concepts of "front stage" and "back stage" as key analytical frameworks, with particular emphasis on the "front stage." Although he did not directly discuss the "back stage," Goffman described its nature in an indirect manner [11]. On the "front stage," performers present themselves in front of an audience according to a pre-designed scenario, such as appropriate appearance, matching verbal expressions, or the use of certain necessary props. In contrast, performers in the "back stage" are more casual and prepare for the "front stage" performance. For example,

a teacher with a 20-year "smoking history" might be busy in the office gathering information about the dangers of smoking to teach students not to smoke, but then smoke themselves in the dormitory after class. Therefore, we can consider the "back stage" to be a private space isolated from the audience, and performers typically restrict outsiders from entering.

From the example above, it can be seen that a person who appears as a teacher on the "front stage" may play different roles in different scenarios and time periods on the "back stage," such as "a teacher preparing lessons" and "a smoker." This indicates that the roles a person plays on the "front stage" are easily defined by the setting, while the roles played on the "back stage" can be diverse. Extending this to marathons, since marathon organizers do not have requirements for the social roles and identities of participants, anyone can sign up for the race as long as they do not have health issues. These marathon "show-offs" from various industries and fields in society may play different social roles in different places such as family, company, and units, yet they share similar characteristics when preparing for the marathon "performance," such as the need for fitness, a love for running, self-presentation, and conformity. Therefore, the roles assigned to marathon "show-offs" by different social fields, family life, and work units in this large "back stage" differ, leading to different purposes for their performances on the marathon "front stage."

### 3.2.2. *Script design*

Goffman defines a "script" as a "standardized procedure," which is a predetermined pattern of action that the performing unit unfolds and can present or perform from beginning to end during the performance in other situations [12]. At the same time, the individual behavior of actors within the script is restricted by objective social expectations, so the script represents the objective demands of social structure on individual actors. When a script is appropriately introduced into a specific stage, the "standardized procedure" not only displays the objective demands of the original social structure on individual actors but also includes all the rules inherent in the stage itself [13]. Similarly, if applied to marathon competitions or the competition rules of marathons, it becomes the "standardized procedure" of marathons, which requires event organizers, managers, athletes, and referees to comply, otherwise, the competition cannot proceed.

Marathon competitions are different from general sports fitness programs; participants must have strong willpower and good physical fitness to qualify. For marathon "show-offs" to achieve their preset ideal performance goals on the marathon "stage," they must do some corresponding pre-race preparations. This includes daily appropriate running exercises, setting different training plans based on their physical capacity, rationally evaluating their physical condition, making adequate psychological preparations, and preset their own competition scenarios and patterns on the field (for example, if the body does not allow running the entire course, then preset a suitable distance for themselves); moreover, marathon "show-offs" in the process of designing and preparing backstage scripts also need to selectively make some necessary personal prop preparations according to their own participation purposes, such as: indispensable running gear, eye-catching costumes, and unusual appearance designs, etc.

## 3.3. Marathon "show-offs" front Stage presentation and performance methods

### 3.3.1. *Stage setup*

Stage setting refers to the decorations, furnishings, and other backdrops, props, and backgrounds needed during a performance on stage. The general concept of "stage setting" is geographically fixed and unchanging, but there are exceptions, such as funeral ceremonies [14]. The stage provided for participants in a marathon race is mobile. Over the hundred years of development since the first Olympic Games, the spirit of the marathon has been continuously interpreted, enriched, and developed, integrating into the thoughts and consciousness of people around the world, and becoming a spiritual civilization that influences all of humanity, a model of human spiritual civilization, and a trend in the development of urban culture [15]. Today's marathon races have clearly evolved from a pure Olympic competitive event into a popular city marathon that promotes urban culture and develops sports tourism around the world.

As the "stage" of the mobile marathon race—the cities that host the events design their courses based on their unique characteristics, all hoping to provide a beautiful stage background (scenery along the route) for marathon "show-offs" through the varied "stage settings" along the way. On one hand, this allows them to forget the monotony of long-distance running, enjoy the competition, relieve the pressures of society, work,

and family, and release suppressed emotions. On the other hand, it also serves as a window to promote the city, stimulating local tourism and economic development.

### 3.3.2. *Personal front stage*

Goffman uses the term "stage setting" to refer to the scenic parts of the expressive equipment, and the term "front stage" to refer to the other items of the expressive equipment. In simple terms, once the "stage setting" is defined for a certain scene, it is difficult to change before the performance ends; whereas the "front stage" refers to the image we present to the observers on the well-defined stage, such as: appearance, body movements, verbal expressions, and physical characteristics.

### 3.3.3. *Performance*

Performance is divided into two aspects: "appearance" (the messages given by the individual) and "demeanor" (the manifestations revealed by the individual). "Appearance" serves as the first sensory visual for the performer to the observer, aiming to indicate their gender, age, identity, etc.; while "demeanor" is the performer's way of performing, signaling what interactive role they will play in the upcoming performance situation. The two often have consistency, that is, the performer will make corresponding adjustments to their "appearance" based on the role they intend to play, and then convey their performance intentions through "demeanor," using it as a symbol to communicate to the observer.

Nowadays, many people "show off" their fitness "exploits" in various settings: some boast about their step counts and rankings; others flaunt their running routes; some show off the time, kilometers, and calories burned displayed on the treadmill dashboard; and some directly post photos of their fitness prowess online or in WeChat Moments, naturally followed by a chorus of praise from friends [16]. Among these "fitness show-offs," some may genuinely share information related to fitness, but most "show-offs" are not interested in the meaning of "fitness" itself; instead, they use "fitness" as a "shell" to flaunt themselves, aiming to regain their "sense of presence" through virtual online platforms amidst inner restlessness and identity crises.

In terms of marathon races, for ordinary running enthusiasts who have not received professional training, completing a full 42.195 kilometers race can be challenging, leading many participants (almost most participants) to give up halfway. The "explosive" growth of domestic marathon events also inevitably leads to management issues in newly hosting cities. One of the most common issues is that some participants do not wear the uniforms and bibs provided by the organizers, but instead, display their uniqueness with bizarre costumes (as shown in Figure 1), such as imitating various cartoon characters and historical figures. Some even directly advertise for certain companies out of profit considerations, and some explicitly state their personal interests on their clothing (looking for marriage, making friends, etc.). These phenomena indicate that marathon races are losing their original face and significance.



Figure 1: Scene of Chongqing International Marathon on March 22, 2014

These marathon "show-offs" are similar to those who "show off their fitness"; their purpose for participating is not a genuine love for marathon events or a passion for running and fitness, but rather to use the vast stage provided by the marathon to display and show off themselves, conveying a distorted sense of pride that is based on being envied.

### 3.4. The transition between "front stage" and "back stage" for marathon "show-offs"

#### 3.4.1. *Daily life and race performance of marathon participants*

The normal transition between the "front stage" and "back stage" of marathon participants: Marathon events are fashionable sports projects that are conducive to building healthy cities, activating urban tourism, enhancing urban culture, and effectively promoting nationwide fitness activities [17]. The participants demonstrate a positive engagement in physical exercise and a health-first lifestyle, which can inspire and encourage more people to join this sport. In a survey about "whether one's love for marathon sports can make friends or colleagues interested in international marathon races," out of 3,781 respondents, 2,023 (accounting for 53.50%) expressed "great interest" [18]. Clearly, if someone among friends and family participates in a marathon, it can positively influence their surrounding relatives and friends to join marathon races as well.

If we consider a marathon race as a performance, then the different roles that marathon participants play in their daily lives on the "back stage" will interact with observers through their performance "deportment" on the "front stage" of the marathon course, thereby conveying a signal of "actively participating in physical exercise and choosing a healthy lifestyle." For themselves, such an experience, as a sports and tourism journey to understand the culture of different regions and to get close to nature, undoubtedly also helps to alleviate the pressures of society, family, and work, and to release negative emotions.

In order to have a good "performance" on the marathon course, participants also continuously rehearse and simulate performances in their daily lives, this "back stage," to adapt to the marathon race. For example, buying a pair of suitable running shoes, familiarizing themselves with the course in advance, mentally preparing for the arduous competition, and setting their own competition goals, to prevent too many accidents during the formal "front stage" performance, causing the "performance" to end prematurely or not achieve the desired performance effect.

#### 3.4.2. *Marathon "show-offs": performance vs. preparation gap*

The study of the transformation between the "front stage" and "back stage" of marathon "show-offs" begins by borrowing the term "show-off" to describe participants who are not truly fond of marathon races or running exercises, but merely join the marathon as a platform to "show off and excessively display themselves" out of blind conformity. For these individuals, they do not make "genuine" preparations for the "performance" of participating in a marathon. On the contrary, they spend more effort on "how to attract more attention on the course." Thus, for them, participating in the race has completely lost the true meaning of running exercise, and like the virtual network, what they pursue is merely their own "sense of presence." However, compared to virtual online platforms, marathon races are much more real because here, "performers" and "audience" interact in an unmasked space. This makes it easy to understand why there are "strange costumes, colorful hair dyes, and commercial advertisements flying around" on the course.

In the introduction to "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," Goffman states: "Observers will divide the events they witness into two parts: one part that individuals can relatively easily manipulate at will, mainly their verbal expressions; the other part that individuals seem to hardly notice or control, mainly coming from the impressions they reveal" [19]. Specifically, in the context of marathon races, marathon "show-offs" appear on the "stage" of the competition, and before the performance even begins, observers can already guess the roles the "show-offs" are about to play from their appearance. But even so, "accidents" often occur. Because "show-offs" cannot truly follow the marathon's "standard procedures" to fully prepare their "front stage" performance roles in the "back stage"; when the real performance begins, "role confusion, role tension, and even role conflict" become inevitable, making their performance impossible to carry on. Because genuine marathon performers convey a positive attitude towards physical exercise and a healthy lifestyle through the act of running, while enjoying the urban culture and natural scenery along the way. In contrast, "show-offs" deliberately engage in "self-display" to attract the audience's attention. The stark

contrast between the "show-offs" "appearance" and "demeanor" and the setting of the marathon stage creates a strong disparity, leading to a very negative "impression" among observers during their interaction. This is the opposite of the "show-offs" intended performance effect, causing them to lose the meaning of their performance.

#### 4. Conclusion

The current trend of "national fitness fever" driven by the demand for fitness among the entire population in China shows no sign of slowing down. This has led to the rapid development of city marathons in China in recent years, which integrate urban cultural promotion, sports tourism, public fitness, and commercial value development. In just a few years, the number of marathon events held in China has increased more than tenfold, and the number of participants has also soared. Compared to other sports, marathon races are simple in technique, inclusive of participants, and have low requirements for the competition venue. These characteristics can to some extent alleviate the current contradiction between the demand for urban public fitness and the lack of fitness programs and venues in China, providing a fashionable, green, and environmentally friendly fitness option for urban residents.

The marathon craze has given rise to marathon "show-offs." These marathon "show-offs" use the material form of marathon races to dilute the Olympic value and significance of the marathon, satisfying their psychological needs for comparison, showing off, and achieving self-interest. They attract the audience's attention on the marathon course with their unique "appearance" and "demeanor," with the purpose of self-display, alleviating their own inner restlessness and anxiety, and demonstrating their sense of presence.

Since the rise of the "show-off" community, they have always used virtual online social platforms and mobile communication devices as their performance "front stage." In recent years, with the continuous development of marathon events in China, they have begun to take advantage of the large number of participants, strong inclusiveness, and spacious competition venues of marathons, using marathon races as a new stage for their performance. However, as a sports competition, the marathon requires more personal experience. Compared to virtual online platforms that only display the self through simple symbols such as images, text, audio, and video, it greatly increases the authenticity of the "show-offs" performance and audience interaction, making the self-display and showing off effects of "show-offs" more outstanding. Because of this, in recent years, there has been a surge of "show-offs" flocking to marathon races, which has also directly led to a series of problems on the competition course.

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